

Taxonomic status of the Sword-billed Hummingbird *Ensifera ensifera caerulescens*

by Gary R. Graves

Received 24 November 1990

Ensifera ensifera caerulescens (Lowe, 1939) was described from an unique specimen in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. According to Lowe (1939: 73) the new taxon is distinguished by "its smaller dimensions and by having the sides of the neck and band across the chest, when held to the light, bright metallic blue". Walters (1986) was apparently the first since Lowe to critically examine the type. He confirmed Lowe's diagnosis and concluded that *caerulescens* may be a valid taxon and that there was no reason to suppose that the colour was due to an aberration. As part of a comprehensive review of Sword-billed Hummingbird systematics I examined the type of *E. ensifera caerulescens*. Here I present evidence that casts doubt on its taxonomic validity.

The specimen is a taxidermy mount with head and bill tilted upwards to the left; the left side of the neck and upper breast are slightly concealed from view. The plumage is faded, especially the throat and breast. When male specimens of nominate *E. ensifera* are viewed head-on in direct light, the lower throat is bordered posteriorly from shoulder to shoulder by a brilliant green pectoral band. In *caerulescens*, the colour of the pectoral band is bluish-green (changing with the angle of inspection) on the exposed right side, becoming slightly greener on the concealed left side. The feathers that reflect the bluest light when viewed head-on are violet or bluish-violet in indirect light. These are asymmetrically distributed; about twice as many violet feathers occur to the right of the ventral midline as to the left. When viewed under a 7-30 × stereo microscope the bases of violet feathers that are concealed by overlapping feathers are green as in nominate *E. ensifera*. In other words, only portions of the pectoral feathers that are exposed to light are violet.

The asymmetric distribution of blue or violet feathers strongly suggests that the distinguishing character of *caerulescens* is an artifact, possibly the result of exposure to light. The occurrence of unfaded feather bases in the affected area corroborates that possibility. In sum, the evidence indicates that the distinguishing character of *E. e. caerulescens* Lowe, 1939 is due to postmortem change. It should thus be placed in the synonymy of *Ensifera ensifera* (Boissoneau, 1839).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Kelvin Boot, Curator of the Royal Albert Museum, for lending the type of *E. e. caerulescens* and to the United States Department of State for safely transporting it to Washington. I thank Richard Banks for commenting on the manuscript and Banks, Ralph Browning, and Richard Zusi for examining the specimen.

References:

Lowe, W. P. 1939. The bird collections in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. *Ibis* (14)3: 65-75.

Walters, M. 1986. A re-examination of the types of *Trogon rossi*, and *Ensifera ensifera caerulescens*. *Hornero* 12: 301–302.

Address: Dr Gary R. Graves, Department of Vertebrate Zoology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560, U.S.A.

© British Ornithologists Club 1991

Taxonomic comments on the Dunlin *Calidris alpina* from northern Alaska and eastern Siberia

by M. Ralph Browning

Received 27 November 1990

The population of *Calidris alpina* that breeds north of the Brooks Range in northern Alaska was considered by the American Ornithologists' Union (1957) to belong to the subspecies *pacifica* Coues, 1861 of western Alaska. That northern population is now referred to either *articola* Todd, 1953 (Browning 1977, Cramp & Simmons 1983, Morrison 1984, Greenwood 1986), or *sakhalina* Vieillot, 1816 (MacLean & Holmes 1971, Prater *et al.* 1977, Johnsgard 1981, Hayman *et al.* 1986), the subspecies that also breeds in northeastern Siberia (Kozlova 1962, Vaurie 1965).

Calidris alpina is now known to breed also to the south on the Kamchatka Peninsula (Tomkovich 1986) and Sakhalin Island (Nechaev 1978). Tomkovich (*op. cit.*) defined the range of *sakhalina* as the Chukotsky Peninsula, Anadyr' Lowlands and Wrangel Island of north-eastern Siberia, and proposed the subspecific name *kistchinski* for birds that breed on the Kamchatka Peninsula, northern Kuril Islands, south-western Koryak Highlands, and the northwestern coast of the Sea of Okhotsk. He characterized *articola* as differing from *sakhalina* only in the colour of the back, and *kistchinski* as differing from *sakhalina* in the longer exposed culmen and more heavily speckled black plumage with narrower and less rusty borders of the dorsal feathers. Another subspecies, *litoralis*, was proposed by Nechaev & Tomkovich (1987) for birds that breed on northern Sakhalin Island. The name *litoralis* is preoccupied by *Tringa littoralis* Brehm, 1831, and the new subspecies was renamed *actites* by Nechaev & Tomkovich (1988). *Calidris a. actites* was characterized as the smallest (wing, culmen, weight) of the subspecies in eastern Siberia and northern Alaska and with a blacker crown than in *kistchinski*.

My earlier study (Browning 1977) included a series from Gizhiga, Siberia, as *sakhalina* but according to Tomkovich (1986) the specimens are from the range of *kistchinski*. Because of this, and because other studies (e.g. Greenwood 1986) of the species did not include specimens from the range of the newly described taxa from eastern Siberia, I have reevaluated *articola*, *sakhalina* and the new subspecies. This study included specimens of *sakhalina*, *kistchinski* and *actites* selected by Dr